

LEARNING

(General collection of notes from the McNamara volume: Evolution of the War-U.S. GVN relations 1963-67.)

To predict the performance of a bureaucracy, investigate how a career incentives are structured, in actual practice, so as to influence reporting, decision-making, and the allocation of attention and effort in one direction rather than another. For example, ask: What sorts of reports and recommendations, will arouse controversy; will lead to requests for further information, for supporting evidence, for "proof"; which recommendations will lead to and (undesired) enlargement of responsibilities and required effort; which will contradict or appear to ^{criticize} ~~criticize~~ the performance or suggestions in the reports, recommendations or performance of another agency, colleague, a superior? By consequences such as these attach regularly to certain kinds of initiatives and not to others, "learning" will almost surely take place among subordinates; learn, through heresy, by intuition, or by painful experience, not to increase the difficulties of their own job or to lower their prospects for advancement by making such initiatives unless they feel a compelling need.

Thus, over much of our involvement in Vietnam, "there was no disagreement among Washington, the Embassy, and MACV that U.S. commitments should be used to improve GVN's morale and performance. In contrast, however, they often disagreed about putting pressure on the GVN." In other words, -for-any-given-agency,-to-encourage-a-commitment-by-the-U-S:-government-in-the-interest-of-influencing-a-foreign-regime-is-"to-^{draw-on-}~~expend~~ the-capital- In consequence, proposals for new commitments move smoothly through the bureaucracy up to the President for decision; proposals for

increased leverage would reach him tardily, if at all pending delayed pending resolution of disagreements. In contrast, to propose that some form of assistance to the GVN be held up as a means to increase U.S. leverage was to ^{accept the risk --} ~~take upon oneself~~ if one's proposal were accepted -- of bearing the responsibility of whatever deterioration might be held to have resulted from delay or absense of the U.S. assistance. This risk loomed especially large if the proponent knew himself to be in ~~the~~ a small minority; ~~xxxixxxx~~ if the leverage were actually used, he would be perceived as having ^{had} a major causal impact on it, and thus bear a high measure of responsibility for the consequences (an instance of Ellsberg's rule on the dangers of being in an "effective minority" within a bureaucracy). Thus, Lodge could not avoid a considerable ^{weight} ~~weight~~ within the government, of responsibility for the November 1963 coups against Diem; and the questionable results of that initiative almost surely made him far more cautious about ever finding himself again, during his second tour as Ambassador, in an "effective minority" recommending a change in government.

The consistent pattern that MACV favored the ease of leverage much less than the Embassy, and the Embassy less than the State, deserves attention from this point of view of incentives and agency aims.

MISTAKEN ESTIMATES IN US DECISION-MAKING ON
VIETNAM: TENTATIVE LIST

1. Ultimate requirements for US troops, if infiltration continued and US troops were committed. In 1961, the JCS, supported by McNamara and Taylor, believed it highly likely that the maximum US troop requirement would be on the order of 205,000 troops, even if U.S. troop involvement should trigger large scale North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist assault. (This estimate assumed sizeable commitment of non-US SEATO forces as well.) The possibility that 500,000 U.S. troops could be employed with as little decisive effect as has been achieved in the last two years was not suggested in any DOD discussion in 1961 (nor did this occur between 1961 and 1965, to my knowledge).

2. No DOD estimate in 1961 (or so far as I am aware between 1961 and 1964) foresaw the possibility of massive infiltration of North Vietnamese regular units and the employment in guerrilla fashion (i.e. evasive deployment, hit and run tactics, and a low rate of combat). Thus, ultimate U.S. troop requirements (above) were estimated on the assumption that large scale North Vietnamese involvement -- which definitely was seen as a possible or likely response to large scale US involvement--would come in the form of a conventional assault, highly subject to air attack, and interdiction.

3. Advocates of a coercive strategy threatening strategic industrial targets in North Vietnam (primarily Walt Rostow in 1961, joined by a number of others in 1964 and 1965) greatly over-estimated the valuation

the GRV looters placed upon these "hard won accomplishments," relative to the determination of those leaders to unify Vietnam under their control. Moreover, there appears no mention in any of the discussions of this tactic between 1961 and 1965 of the possibility that the Soviet Union would guarantee the replacement of such assets destroyed by bombing or in general would increase aid so as to compensate for bombing lawsuits. (Neither, is there any mention of the possibility that bombing might result in increased influence of the Soviet Union, relative to Communist China in the affairs of North Vietnam by virtue of an increased aid program and the ability to provide North Vietnam with SAMS and other advanced technology/)

4. Systematic over-estimation of the influence and usefulness of U.S. advisors and subordinate levels: a 1961 discussion shows virtually no speculation upon the possible limitations or causes for ineffectiveness at this approach.

5. It seems likely that the extent to which the large increase in the U.S. advisory system, and their degree of combat involvement, would increase the commitment of U.S. prestige to the joint effort in Vietnam.

6. Although shortcomings of ARVN performance were frequently noted in 1960 and 1961, the depth and in-tract ability of these shortcomings seem under-estimated steadily from 1961 through 1965; this under estimation was reflected in U.S. emphasis upon measures and could not have reduced ARVN weaknesses radically, centralization of field command, unified strategic planning, increased U.S. advisory effort.

7. The ^{lack}~~character~~ of popular support for Diem, though noted by

some individuals, was considerably under-rated, both in its intensity, breadth and impact upon GVN policies and their effectiveness. There was no mention in 1961 of potential organized opposition among urban Buddhists outside Saigon, students in Saigon, or, under some circumstances, U.S. public revulsion against Diem: all major factors that contributed to the breakdown of the Diem regime and its overthrow in 1963.

8. In 1962 and 1963 a strong ^{under}~~over~~estimate by MACV of VC strength, recruiting and infiltration (combined with great over optimism on the results of ARVN operations and the strategic hamlet program).

9. Over-estimate of the ability of military aid and advice and the resulting expected improvement in Vietnamese military performance and security to compensate for the political shortcomings of the Diem regime and failure to move toward correcting them. (Improvement in military security during 1962 -- generally believed to be even greater than it was -- did not prevent the regime's political weakness and iniquity, acting upon both Vietnam and United States' publics and decision-makers, from triggering the downfall of the regime, and a subsequent breakdown in all counter insurgency programs in the countryside).

10. (Schweitzer) In 1964-65 MACV considerably overestimated the effectiveness of limited U.S. combat forces against Viet Cong main force units, extrapolating from the tactics and effectiveness of the Viet Cong units against ARVN forces; the ability of the Viet Cong and NVA to adapt ^{their}~~and~~ tactics to the challenge presented by U.S. forces, on the basis of early experience, was under estimated. (While the competence in the Vietnam environment and the ability to learn and adapt quickly of U.S. forces was over estimated).

11. Virtually all discussion in 1964 of the affects of a bombing campaign against North Vietnam assumed the liklihood that it would lead to early negotiations with North Vietnam --brought on by initiatives by North Vietnam and pressures from U.S. allies and public. There was no mention in 1964 or early 1965 of the possibility that on-going U.S. bombing might foreclose Hanoi willingly to engage in discussions; i.e. that Hanoi's desire to end the bombing might not be great enough to induce the GRV to accept the loss of face involved in appearing to negotiate under pressure.

U.S. PATTERN OF EXPECTATIONS

While we have been demonstrating that we are no paper tiger, North Vietnam has, since 1965, demonstrated certain attributes too, for our education (each of these amount to disappointments, surprises, for some high U.S. analysts, calling for reconsideration of their policies):

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- 1) resolution under bombing and extraordinary organizational skill and discipline;
- 2) willingness to risk invasion; and to sacrifice all their "hard-won, prized" industrial capacity;
- 3) willingness to reinforce NVA forces in South Vietnamese much as necessary, to continue infiltration under bombing, and press attacks in South Vietnam.
- 4) Non-eagerness for "discussions," or a potical solution.

While VC have demonstrated:

- 1) Willingness to attack U.S., take large losses.
- 2) Ability to recruit, to enlarge forces
- 3) ability to contain defection, especially cadres.
- 4) ability of MF/NVA to evade destruction.

While both South Vietnam and Chicoms have gotten more involved. All of these were hoped by some to be improbable, as of February, '65 (start of bombing) or by June '65 (start of big troop commitment): either North Vietnam would cave, or there would be (pacification, MF NVA) improvement in South, in reducing the VC/NVA, or at least discussions would be underway, perhaps ceasefire; by 1966.

(No one -- and surely not the VC or DRV -- really ever doubted the "good news" of 1965-67: that VC could not defeat the U.S. or even inflict a big tactical defeat, on U.S. forces).

(U.S. Patterns of Expectations)

Likewise, it is how their superiors are graded and promoted;
and loyalty, ambition and prudence all dictate against reporting
that one's superior has failed, or has lied. (Indeed, ^{whereas} to lie, oneself
-- especially in the interests of one's superior, is not high among ^{on the list of}
bureaucratic risks; to expose or suggest lying by one's superior,
or the organization, is near the top of the scale.)

LESSONS

U.S. Pattern of Expectations: Beliefs

To begin to see:

See (like Bodard) that everyone is wrong -- ignorant -- fooling himself -- rationalising.

... that even the "good guys" are deceived, mistaken...

Listen critically, with awareness of hypothesis: "He, too, is mistaken"... "wishful" (e.g. wishes to believe he knows enough to know the answer...)

[e.g., note that Bodard, himself, like all, puts all emphasis on Chicon's support, 1949, sanctuary: not on DRV control of government in 1945-46.]

(U.S. Pattern of Expectations)

We didn't recognize our own inability to gauge popular unrest in a police state: in presence of coercion, absence of free press, discussion, or political activity.

The only "dissatisfaction" we saw was among those we talked to: officials, politicians, middle class. We worried about sects only in terms of their (small) armed bands -- not their members or "cadre."

REPORTING

State guidance to Lodge on January 17th:

"Essential to retain advisors down to sector and batallion level as we now have them, and consider establishment of subsector advisors as highly desirable improvement from our viewpoint. Such advisors are best assurance that the U.S. materiel we supply is used to full advantage. Beyond this, we cannot give adequate justification for our great involvement in Vietnam... if we are to be denied access to the facts."

Thus, State justifies the need for subsector advisors -- resisted by the Minh Government -- on the basis of the need to get the facts. But to what end were the facts needed? In order to "give adequate justification for our great involvement in Vietnam." The subsequent emphasis upon "positive" rather than "pessimistic" reporting for news of "progress" rather than problems, can be seen here.

REPORTING

Indicators used in 1962

- RVNAF operations: scale
frequency
"effectiveness": casualty ratios
weapons lost/captured
- size of RVNAF; training; material;
- VC operations: VC-initiated actions
- Strategic Hamlet Program
- [Not: size of VC organization: and infiltration, recruiting
strength of VC organization; VC capability (and arms)
reducing RVNAF weaknesses...
GVN political defects
population attitudes
RVNAF desertion rates

20 March 1963:

REPORTING

There was a tendency at high levels not to examine critically who was doing the reporting: in particular, sending optimistic reports. How experienced were they; how accurate in the past; what known biases did they suffer (e.g., operational responsibilities, past controversial "positions" to defend)?

Hence, a shift in reporting content actually associated with a change in the agencies or individuals reporting would be taken as showing a "new trend": e.g., 1962. [Increasing weight, in reporting, to: MACV; (Harkins) SACSA (Krinlak); DOD (McN) vs. Embassy, CIA, Intelligence estimators.

(Conflict ^{over} our mid-62 NIE).

(Controversy over INR RFE-90 of 22 October 1963) (CIA reports of February, 1964)]

After December, 1963, disillusioned by prior "distorted Vietnamese reporting" MCN proposed to increase MACV staffs for a "reliable, independent US appraisal of the status of operations." [Yet the bias of a larger MACV Headquarters Staff almost surely outweighed more objective US reporting at lower levels!]